



Courtesy California Department of Water Resources

Water levels were low at San Luis Reservoir in Gustine, Calif., during the severe drought, Aug. 19, 2014. The reservoir holds 627,000 acre-feet more water than it did at this time a year ago.

Water Project boosts allocation

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Early-season storms will enable the State Water Project to increase its anticipated deliveries from 15 percent to 20 percent, the agency has announced.

Abundant rainfall in early December and for a few days in mid-February enabled the state Department of Water Resources to send water to the San Luis Reservoir south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to serve customers during dry months.

The reservoir near Los Banos, Calif., holds 627,000 acre-feet more water than it did at this time a year ago, so state water managers will be able to leave water in Lake Oroville in case the drought persists late this year and into 2016, officials explained.

“We’re able to go up a bit ... because of the storms in December and February,” DWR spokesman Ted Thomas said. “It’s kind of an important thing to note that the reason we are confident we can deliver 20 percent is we took advantage of the runoff from the two storm systems to pump water into San Luis Reservoir south of the Delta.”

The state increase comes as many farmers who rely on federal Central Valley Project have learned they will likely get none again this year. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation must contend with a more complicated step-ladder of senior and junior water rights, whereas the state can make across-the-board allocations to its 29 water-district contractors, Thomas said.

“They are delivering a substantial amount of water” to senior rights-holders along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, Thomas said. “They’re not at a zero allocation for everyone.”

In all, the DWR expects to deliver 840,000 acre-feet of the nearly 4.2 million acre-feet requested by contractors, the agency explained in a news release. A 20 percent allocation would be the second-lowest since 1991, when agricultural customers of the project got a zero allocation and municipal customers received 30 percent, according to the DWR.

Last year the state delivered just 5 percent of requested water to contractors after allocating as much as 80 percent three years earlier.

“We welcome the much-needed, modest increase in water supplies,” State Water Contractors general manager Terry Erlewine said in a statement. “The severe multi-year drought has created a water supply deficit that will not be easy to close, and we need to capture what we can before winter is over.”

The DWR made its announcement March 2 as rain was still falling in some parts of the state after a weekend system that brought heavy downpours to Southern California, light showers in the Central Valley and 12 to 18 inches of snow in the Sierra Nevada.

Thomas said the state’s allocation could increase again if forecasts for a wet March prove true, although he doesn’t think an increase is likely.

“I don’t see them (allocations) improving but we’re still hoping they will,” he said. “We’ve had significant precipitation in March in years past. Right at this moment it doesn’t appear promising but we’re hoping things change.”

Farms to lose federal water again

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Many farms in California’s Central Valley will have to do without federal water again this year unless big spring storms replenish the state’s woeful mountain snowpack.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s initial allocation, announced Feb. 27, set aside no water for agricultural land without senior water rights either north or south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta as the snowpack remains less than 20 percent of normal.

Cities will get enough water to meet their health and safety needs or at least 25 percent of normal supplies, whichever is greater, and the bureau will meet with Friant Division contractors to determine what amount of water they’ll need for health and safety.

“Today’s picture is not a pretty one,” bureau Mid-Pacific Regional Director Davis Murillo told reporters in a conference call, adding that officials are bracing for a fourth straight year of drought.

“The rain events in December were encouraging, but the persistently dry weather (since then) underscores our need to plan for another critical year of drought,” he said.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

An irrigation canal sends Central Valley Project water to farms near Red Bluff, Calif., in the spring of 2014. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has announced its initial allocations of project water for the coming year.

Senior water rights holders along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers will receive some water but their allocations will be reduced, officials said. Last year they ended up with about 65 percent of their normal supplies.

In a dry year, senior rights holders must receive at least 75 percent of their contract amounts before more junior

users begin receiving water. The water sent to senior contractors is determined by levels in Shasta Lake, which was at 57 percent of capacity and 79 percent of normal as of Feb. 26.

Officials noted that conditions could improve with nearly two months remaining in California’s rainy season, perhaps prompting increased

supplies to urban users and potentially some water available for farms.

“This is our initial allocation based on what we know today,” said Pablo Arroyave, the bureau’s regional deputy manager. “We certainly hope that conditions will improve and the hydrology gets to average or above average in the next few months.”

But the zero-water allocation was no surprise to growers who’ve been facing the sinking feeling that water shutoffs that hampered their crops last year would be repeated because of the meager snowpack.

Farmers in the Westlands Water District who left thousands of acres unplanted or irrigated by pumping scarce ground water last summer know they’ll have to make the same tough choices this year, district spokeswoman Gayle Holeman told The Associated Press.

Still, California Citrus Mutual blasted the bureau’s announcement, complaining that “a massive amount” of water has been transferred away from entities south of the delta with no accountability for how changes in water usage have been made.

“We think the state and federal agencies and administrations have a policy that essen-

tially destroys the food supply,” CCM president Joel Nelsen told the Capital Press. “We’ve got to be the only state and nation on earth setting policies that do that.”

Nelsen said about 50,000 acres in the state’s prime citrus belt in Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties have no access to ground water. Some of them have been able to purchase water at \$1,200 to \$1,400 an acre-foot — which is 12 to 14 times higher than it was before the drought — but “I don’t know if they’ll be able to find that water (in the future), nor could they afford that water,” he said.

California Farm Bureau Federation president Paul Wenger asserts the announcement reinforces the need to move quickly on water projects authorized by Proposition 1, the \$7.5 billion water bond that passed in November, and on congressional reform of environmental laws.

“The CVP announcement is both saddening and maddening,” Wenger said in a statement. “It’s saddening because the continued cutoff of water will prolong the impact of water shortages on farmers, their employees and rural communities. It’s maddening because California still struggles to manage water wisely and flexibly, especially in dry years.”

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